



Stefka Georgieva (1923-2004) – architect at the Bulgarian state planning office

27 June to 27 September 2019

- Press tour:** Wednesday, 26 June 2019, 10am
- Speakers:** Aneta Bulant-Kamenova and Adolph Stiller
- Open house:** Tuesday, 26 June 2019, 6.30pm (by invitation only)
- Curators:** Aneta Bulant-Kamenova and Adolph Stiller
- Venue:** Ringturm Exhibition Centre
Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna
- Opening hours:** Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)
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Running from 27 June to 27 September 2019, this exhibition at the Ringturm pays tribute to Bulgaria's best-known architect of the second half of the 20th century, Stefka Georgieva. She is widely regarded as the country's most important proponent of the discipline between the 1960s and the 1980s.

The multiple-award-winning architect – among others, she received the Gottfried von Herder Prize from the University of Vienna in 1981 – left a lasting impression on the development of architecture in Bulgaria in the shape of key buildings in the country. In recognition of her talent, she was appointed group manager at Glavprojekt in 1973 and head of department at Sofprojekt in 1981 – the two most important state planning bureaus in the Communist-led Balkan state.

Her extraordinary feel for materials and details grew out of a two-year study period under Hans Döllgast in Munich. In the many buildings she completed, this was coupled with a formal language that reflected the state's ideology, into which she skilfully integrated national vernacular traditions without losing sight of international trends such as brutalism. Besides imposing high-rises, she also designed various exhibitions aimed at raising Bulgaria's international profile.

Following the onset of an economic downturn in the country at the end of the 1970s, Georgieva's professional focus switched to Africa. However, with only a few exceptions, the large-scale urban development plans, as well as designs for sports centres, shopping centres and hotels she prepared for Nigeria remained on the drawing board, due to the country's extremely unstable political situation.

The exhibition at the Ringturm encompasses the life's work of this exceptional architectural protagonist, illustrated by the buildings she completed behind the Iron Curtain.

The era and her style: Bulgarian brutalism

Bulgaria came under the Soviet sphere of influence after the second world war, and was officially declared a socialist people's republic in 1948. The country went through a period of rapid modernisation and industrialisation. This involved urbanisation, the development of public institutions, as well as post-war rebuilding and redesign. Bulgaria put the brakes on the evolution of modernism in 1948, when it introduced the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism. However, following the thaw in political relations in spring 1956, and especially in the 60s and 70s, post-war modernism became the dominant style, and it consolidated its leading position in the decades that followed.

The domestic discourse that took place in the country viewed socialist architecture (1944-1989) as a relatively enclosed system sealed off from external influences, apart from those emanating from the political leadership in Moscow. And although this was generally the case, some factors from outside the official ideological centre, including many from "capitalist" sources in Western Europe, America and Asia, still played a part. They often arrived in Bulgaria at a late stage, and were almost never applied in their purest form, but they had an influence nonetheless.

Bulgaria's totalitarian regime promoted the adoption of brutalism. Officially, the government was left-wing, progressive socialist. But while brutalism spread across the globe as an architectural symbol of the post-war welfare state, embodying the egalitarian construction plans of social institutions and giving rise to countless social and large-scale public buildings, things were different in the People's Republic of Bulgaria. The country was a socialist state and brutalism was applied in important, mainly public constructions. It was used as a high-profile tool. Bulgaria did not employ the brutalist ethic, but primarily its infamous aesthetic. The style mostly featured in prestigious state buildings or the lavish residential areas built for the Communist nomenklatura and selected elites.

A series of structures built in Bulgaria in the 1960s included some of the trademarks of brutalism, such as exposed concrete and "honest" materials that speak for themselves and do not simply imitate other materials. At the same time – and to little surprise – pure brutalism remained a pipe dream. It was subject to regional and contextual influences, and smuggled into the ubiquitous native architecture. Any exceptions came in for strong criticism.

But why was this native element so important? Since its definition in the 19th century, Bulgaria's "national" culture had been in constant conflict, between its alleged roots and the universal culture with which it continually compared itself. The culture continuously tried to come up with local versions

of global influences. Whenever problems or doubts emerged in connection with cultural matters – including within Bulgaria’s socialist culture, and particularly regarding architecture – the aim was always to “find the native aspect”, a formula that was mechanically repeated.

Stefka Georgieva and the state

Stefka Georgieva, who was an official state architect, is one of the least-known figures who served the Communist regime. She headed a planning group at Glavprojekt, the largest Sofia-based state architecture and urban planning institute, and designed such outstanding and prestigious buildings as the Boyana State Residence (Building 2), Villa Magnolia in Evksinograd, several private single-family houses for members of the country’s Communist Party elite, and apartment blocks for the diplomatic corps. In spite of this, or perhaps as a result, she succeeded in creating designs in a distinctly pro-Western style, using deliberately formalised and at times blithely referenced native Bulgarian architecture. Although the buildings she designed were always either seen as an artistic interpretation of precisely this “native tradition” – which was the only possible form of discussion at the time – or criticised as being senseless, imported formalism, they remain among the most striking examples of the brutalist architecture adopted by socialist Bulgaria.

Between 1942 and 1944, Georgieva studied architecture under Hans Döllgast at the Technical University of Munich, before the second world war forced her to return to Bulgaria. In 1947 she obtained her degree in architecture from the newly established State Polytechnic in Sofia, before joining Glavprojekt in 1948, where fairly soon she was involved in socialist Bulgaria’s massive construction projects and the country’s rapid process of modernisation.

In the late 40s she designed kindergartens and primary schools, and in the 1950s and 60s she worked on Bulgaria’s new, internationally acclaimed Druzhba, Golden Sands and Sunny Beach seaside resorts. From the beginning of the project, she was part of the planning team for Sunny Beach, which was headed by architect Nikola Nikolov. Together, they received the Dimitrovska Prize in 1960, which at the time was extremely highly regarded. Georgieva headed a planning team at Glavprojekt from 1973 to 1981, before moving to the second major architecture and design institute in Sofia, Sofprojekt.

Although she enjoyed a long and productive career, Georgieva designed her five most distinctive buildings within a period of 15 years, between 1960 and the mid-1970s:

- Villa 3, the Evksinograd State Residence – later renamed Villa Magnolia after comprehensive remodelling (1960)
- Sofia tennis centre (1968)
- Complex with three residential blocks with apartments for use by the foreign diplomatic corps (Sofia, 1973)
- Chernomorec/Fregata hotel group (Sunny Beach resort, 1972)
- Building 2 at the Boyana State Residence (Sofia, 1974)

All of these projects can be seen as structural, spatial and stylistic experiments at the margins of brutalist architecture, which underline Georgieva’s unequivocal rejection of architectural compromises. This should be taken in the context of the following facts:

- Stefka Georgieva completed the basic stages of her architecture studies in Munich. She developed a distinctive approach that incorporated precise details, the logical development of forms and aesthetic design.
- She won the Dimitrovska Prize, a major accolade at the time, at the comparatively young age of 37. Her work also enabled her to travel easily and frequently within and also outside the Eastern bloc.
- Georgieva was married to Levtscho Manuilov, one of Bulgaria’s top civil engineers of the time. He was her closest adviser and allegedly the driving force behind her most audacious experimental constructions.

Georgieva developed her own set of guiding principles, which she followed in her most prominent buildings:

- Modular design based on grids and recurring elements
- Logical, aesthetic construction as the basis for the logical development of forms and low-key ornamentation
- Tectonic interpretations of the Bulgarian vernacular
- In general, large amounts of exposed concrete and “plain” materials

Two buildings in particular marked the high point of Georgieva’s golden period.



Sofia tennis centre
(1965-1968)

Engineers: Alfred Levi and Levtscho Manuilov

© Stefka Georgieva archives

The Sofia tennis centre has a modular layout and facade. Its defining feature is eight identical, exposed, reinforced concrete frames 37 metres wide and 13 metres high. Their triangular form is multifunctional – it takes its cue from the pitched roofs used in traditional Balkan architecture, helps to integrate the buildings into the surrounding park and prevents them from leaving too overpowering an impression on account of their height. It also uses an elegant approach to satisfy all of the key civil engineering requirements for this type of sports hall.

The building has a natural feel in terms of both its functional organisation and architectural language – a typical result of Georgieva’s ability to use clever constructions as a tool for developing forms.

Both pairs of symmetrical facades are clearly defined by the eight triangular, exposed concrete frames. These front-facing facades extend down to the ground and are decorated with recurring square wooden window frames, which fill the triangular form entirely and create an expressive, modular appearance. The two side facades are formed by an identical vertical arrangement of concrete frames with a metal construction in between, and covered by 22 metre long, seamlessly self-supporting metal panels, which were imported from Belgium. The two contrasting materials that give the structure its brutalist character are the exposed concrete construction and the warm-coloured wood used for the window frames, interior panelling, wainscots and decorative elements. The natural dry stone wall used for the foundation gives the building a regional finishing touch. The Sofia tennis centre is without doubt an egalitarian building – open, accessible, respectful of its surroundings, and with a clear social purpose. This is not the case with Georgieva’s magnum opus, Building 2, also known as the Boyana State Residence.



Boyana State Residence
(1971-1974)

Sofia, with Aleksandar Barov

© *Ivan Pastoukhov*

A government complex with a unique status, the Boyana residence comprises two buildings. Building 1, the former residence of the State Council of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, is now home to the National History Museum. Designed by Georgieva, the second building was a residential complex-cum-hotel, with several additional residential and utility buildings, and it has been used by the Bulgarian government since it was built.

The residence is set in a spectacular park with restricted access. The design concept is reflected in a series of upscale constructions created for Bulgaria's socialist regime, which were intended to showcase high living standards and architectural excellence. The complex was built in accordance with the unwritten rules of totalitarian luxury, and all the buildings are in prime locations. The structural design is uncompromising and all of the materials, finishes and details used are of the highest quality. As a prestigious building that symbolised the power of the state, the Boyana residence was also given an unmistakable Bulgarian character, although this was achieved using late modernist and brutalist formal language.

Georgieva designed the U-shaped, highly symmetrical complex on a square grid. The intimate inner courtyard discreetly references archetypal monastery gardens and village markets, as well as other enduring examples of 19th-century Bulgarian urban planning. This approach is coupled with a pitched roof with a significant overhang, protruding storeys and traditional materials – white plaster, wood and stone cladding. Some of the load-bearing elements are visible, but their exposed concrete is tempered using layers of luxurious materials such as limestone, marble, green copper and brown aluminium.

The Boyana residence is not egalitarian in any shape or form. It symbolises differences in power; it is exclusive and selective, access is restricted, and it is most certainly luxurious. Nevertheless, its aesthetic is brutalist.

All told, Stefka Georgieva managed to create a new aesthetic, which she combined with low-key professional ethics. In this way, she avoided soulless copies and simple imitation. She played the game of Bulgarian brutalism, designed both elitist and egalitarian buildings, and served the state with respect. She embraced external influences and subdued them by means of regionalism. Georgieva designed Stalinist kindergartens and primary schools, modernist hotels, and imposing, brutalist structures. Her work was versatile, ambiguous, functional, monumental and magnificent.

Stefka Georgieva was undeniably one of the visual heroes of Bulgarian post-war modernism.

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm LV: *Stefka Georgieva – Architect in Bulgaria in the 1960s*, Adolph Stiller/Aneta Bulant-Kamenova (eds), German/English, numerous colour and black and white pictures, approx. 200 pages. **Price:** EUR 28